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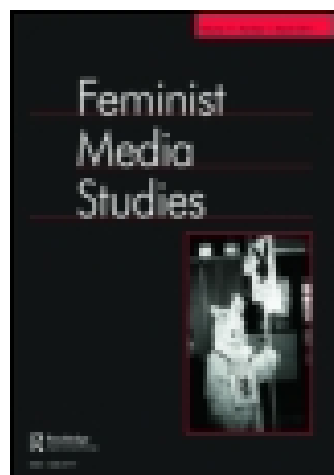
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PLAYING WITH SIMS AS A SPACE OF ONE'S OWN

Sara Mosberg Iversen

Studies of women's use of popular media have highlighted how these contested genres may be used by women to create a space of their own. Is this also the case when the media text in question is a digital game and the community around it moves online? Investigated via a netnographic approach, this article analyses the articulated experiences of playing The Sims 2 and The Sims 3 in relation to how the players perceive the activity's function in their everyday lives. Seven emic categories are identified and discussed in the inductive analysis, namely "relaxation and dealing with stress," "playing according to mood," "managing and taking control," "experimentation," "get what one does not have," "making something one's own," and "creative outlet." A central denominator of these seven categories is the notion of a space of one's own in the widest sense of the phrase. In the discussed accounts playing becomes a way not only to escape other obligations for a while but also in various ways to work with the self and its place in everyday life.

KEYWORDS popular media; digital games; gender; everyday life; leisure

Introduction

Studies of women's use of popular media genres, such as soap opera (Mary Ellen Brown 1994), romance (Janice Radway 1991), and women's magazines (Brita Ytre-Arne 2012, 16), have highlighted how these often contested genres (Charlotte Brundson 1997, 29–43; Barbara O'Connor and Elisabeth Klaus 2000, 379) may be used by women to create a space of their own. Radway (1991), for instance, discusses how romance reading is used by some women to mark themselves as unavailable for care work, and Brown (1994) emphasises how women create a free space for themselves in watching and gossiping about soaps. The game series *The Sims* (TS) (Maxis 2000), with its many expansions and sequels, is another popular media work consumed in particular by women which, similarly to the genres mentioned above, has often been regarded as dubious and somewhat ridiculous within gamer culture and amongst games scholars (Hanna Wirman 2011).

Here, I will analyse the articulated uses of *The Sims 2* (TS2) (Maxis 2004) and *The Sims 3* (TS3) (The Sims Studio 2009) as expressed by dedicated adult players in email and online qualitative interviews. The aim is to examine the perceived function of playing in everyday life of a popular and gendered media text which is consumed primarily inside the home in front of the computer and online in a global network of likeminded fans. Importantly, it is not my intention to assess the described uses of the games normatively. Rather, the goal is to focus on the respondents' own sense-making; their articulated pleasures, anxieties, and

ambivalences. First, I will briefly situate my work in relation to gendered media genres, pleasure, and everyday life as well as to the existing research on the *TS* series and its players. This is followed by a condensed description of *TS2* and *TS3*. Then, methodology will be discussed before proceeding to an inductive analysis of the empirical material which leads to the conceptualisation of the playing of *TS2* and *TS3* as a deliberate creation of a space of one's own.

Gendered Media, Pleasure, and Everyday Life

TS2 and *TS3* are interesting in the context of women's media use because *TS* and its sequels have managed to attract female users like no other digital game before (James Gee and Elisabeth Hayes 2010, 2). Although the number of female gamers is continually rising (The Entertainment Software Association 2012) there has been a tendency within games research, the industry, and popular culture to reduce both the playing of digital games as well as the players to particular notions of acceptable experiences and gamer identities (Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Morie, and Celia Pearce 2007). Historically, the majority of digital games have, both with regards to the mechanisms offered for action as well as in terms of content, invoked a strong, militarised masculine subject characterised by enforced hierarchy, competition, and violent conquest (Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska 2006, 177–184; Valerie Walkerdine 2006). The *TS* series, with its focus on domesticity and relationships, offers players a traditional feminine subject position. These games, then, are highly gendered media spaces.

According to media scholars Barbara O'Connor and Elisabeth Klaus, one of the gratifications offered by media texts is the double pleasures of fantasy and realism (2000, 376–377, 382). The notion of realism is here linked to believability, recognition, and identification, while the notion of fantasy may be either seen as related to illusion and wish fulfilment or to hopeful utopias. Due to their procedurality, *TS2* and *TS3*, likewise, offer users command over many aspects of the game. This may result in a feeling of agency; of being able to exert influence and control, a factor which research suggests may contribute to the particular pleasures of consuming digital games (Thomas Malone 1981; Pam Royse, Joon Lee, Baasanjav Undrahbuyan, Mark Hopson, and Mia Consalvo 2007; Richard Ryan, Scott Rigby, and Andrew Przybylski 2006; Tina Taylor 2003). Importantly, like in society at large, the agency positions offered by the games are situated within an existing structure which nevertheless is formed and may even be reshaped by action (Anthony Giddens 1984).

While several studies have already addressed the game series in terms of depiction and content (Anne-Mette Albrechtslund 2007; Mia Consalvo 2003; Brady Curlew 2005; Mary Flanagan 2003; Miguel Sicart 2003), I will here follow in the steps of another line of inquiry (Catherine Beavis and Claire Charles 2005; Elisabeth Hayes and Elisabeth King 2009; Tanja Sivohnen 2011; Wirman 2011) which centres on what players do with these extremely polysemic media texts. My focus will be on articulations of gameplay in relation to everyday life.

Everyday life is interesting here as the site of practice; the place where ideology is internalised and acted out but also potentially questioned in the social realm (Ben Highmore 2002, 4–8). Aptly, the *TS* series, unlike most large, commercial games, focuses on everyday life, even to the degree where Diane Nutt and Diane Railton (2003) argue that players can only make sense of gameplay by referring to this domain. Playing the games, then, is not only an activity situated in the physical and social domain of the mundane.

Via the subject positions offered, lived life and gameplay also intertwine, reflecting and affecting each other in more or less subtle ways. Hence, playing the game and its sequels may be a way to work through, reconstruct, toy with, accept, or reject aspects of everyday living.

Playing Life

TS2 and *TS3* are usually referred to as “virtual life games.” With a basis in a household, the two single-player games simulate everyday living where basic needs, work, household chores, friendships, family, and romance all have to be handled. Central for gameplay are the Sims, simulated people who are defined by personality traits, emotions, needs, wants, and fears. Sims act on the basis of these variables, which may be either defined by the player or the game, and they also relate to each other on this ground, building over time various types of relationships. Apart from controlling and taking care of Sims, the games also offer the opportunity for construction of Sims, houses, and worlds. Players are given a great deal of control over both their Sims and the environment, and this may be further enhanced with the use of game modifications created by the highly active player community. Players may control nearly all aspects of a Sim’s life, micro-managing every action. It is also possible to sit back and let the game engine control Sims most of the time. Players may control up to eight active Sims, all in the same household, while the game engine controls the rest of the simulated population.

Methodology

I conducted thirteen semi-structured, qualitative email and online interviews during the summer and autumn of 2011, broadly addressing the uses of *TS2* and *TS3*. These accounts are based on and informed by my prolonged participation in the international player community. Consequently, while the interviews are the central empirical material, my approach may be regarded as netnographic (Robert Kozinets 2010), as observations and participation online form the background for the study.

The main site of engagement (Jöelle Kivits 2005, 35–36) for the global fan community of the *TS* series is online. In fact, the many adult players I have encountered over the years only very rarely meet fellow players offline. Hence, by conducting the study online I have engaged the community on its own terms, encountering the members and their practices in the same way that everyone else does (Christine Hine 2000, 48–50). It must be emphasised, then, that while everyday life and experience are central topics, these notions are approached only as articulated rather than through an account created via face-to-face participation in the same time and space. While this approach certainly has its limits in terms of access to the site of everyday living, it also in most cases results in some incredibly rich accounts because respondents get time to reflect and respond when it is most convenient.¹

The actual players, with whom the paper engages, are all long-time users of *TS2* and *TS3*, highly knowledgeable about the games, dispersed around the globe and active in the international, online community. They have all been recruited via self-selection from the same general forum dedicated to the use of the *TS* series through an open call for participation. All respondents self-identify as females, most over the age of thirty, two characteristics indicative of the forum in question at large.² Due to the online nature of the

interactions, this self-presentation may not be accurate in relation to the participant's official data. As argued by Hine (2000, 48–50) this is, however, a general premise for Internet communication and, as such, should be embraced. The interviews have been conducted in the spirit of forum relationships, where participants are free to volunteer as little or as much private information as they feel like. While most of the respondents have shared their lives quite freely, others mainly focused on the games.

It is important to reflect briefly on the implications of all the respondents being recruited from the same forum. This means that they are already deeply involved in reflecting and communicating about their practice with each other, performing a shared culture around the games. Thus, it is striking that most of the respondents report playing in the same ways with a main focus on story-gaming and creation, while only two seem to play mainly based on the goals given by the game. Rather than indicating that this is the only way to play the games, the relative similarities in playing styles and understandings of the games should be regarded as an expression of shared culture.

During the initial coding of the material, where the focus was on expressions of love in and for the game, another theme emerged quite clearly, namely the players' reflections about the relationship between their playing and everyday life. On this basis, I re-coded, looking for all the different explanations and expressions offered by the respondents with regards to their playing and lived lives. This process produced seven emic categories which I will present and analyse below.³

Relaxation and Stress Relief

In many of the interviews, the use of the games is set into the context of a demanding everyday life with work outside or in the home, household chores, and family to take care of:

One of the biggest factors for me is ... time. I have a full time job and two sons (10 and 12). Some days it is crazy, busy and stressful. When I find some alone time towards the end of the evening, I turn to my sim game. Sometimes I see a story line or photos and I think "I miss my sims!!" or "that gives me an idea" ... and off I go. (Betty)

Betty describes a busy and challenging everyday life where playing becomes her way to take time out for herself. Anna sets her gameplay in a similar context:

I find playing the sims a relaxing way to deal with stress. I have been caring for my elderly mother for the last ten years and when I start my game all the stressors of being a caretaker seem to fade away. (Anna)

Neither Betty nor Anna explain how playing the games help them relax, but both describe their playing in terms of escape as a movement from one realm to another. Radway, in her study of romance readers, discusses how her respondents use the act of reading not only as a mental escape but also as a more tangible demarcation which for a time signals that they are not available to care for their families (Radway 1991, 92). The readers in Radway's study, like the players here, through their use of popular media mark out a time and space where work, household chores, and family are not the primary priority as they engage in activities solely for their own enjoyment.

It is an interesting paradox that relief from the demands of work, everyday chores, and family care is found in a game which, to a great degree, simulates these same activities. One way to understand this paradox is in relation to the pleasures of realism and fantasy,

which according to O'Connor and Klaus are often central in the consumption of media texts (2000, 376–377, 382). In this perspective, the games at once present a familiar setting, the household with its call for affective labour and management, where female agency is fully acceptable even within the established order, hereby enabling a well-known and risk-free experience. At the same time, gameplay offers the opportunity to engage either in wishful thinking or negotiate dominant orders, both of which may help make the mundane routines more bearable—although only the latter offers a hope of change. Several of the respondents make clear that their gameplay mirrors their conception of everyday life albeit with fewer harsh realities such as bigotry, failing relationships, powerlessness, and death. Others, as will be discussed later, deliberately play against what they perceive to be the game's and society's dominant models for living.

Playing According to Mood

It is not uncommon for the respondents to write that their playing style differs from session to session; that they play according to mood. While this sometimes seems to indicate that the game is played in line with various inspirations or ideas for projects, some respondents explicitly link a variation in playing style to emotional states. This is, for instance, emphasised several times by Heidi:

Well sometimes I feel like playing a family with loving parents and cute kids, somedays I am in the mood to play a family where the adult son has a crush on his steph mom, and sometimes I want to play my witch, and her chaotic world, and sometimes I want to play a sim who runs a business [...] If I am in a really bad mood, it sometimes helps to torture a sim or two. (Heidi)

When “playing according to mood,” particular emotional states are consciously channelled into the playing session. As shown above, all kinds of emotions may find an outlet here. It is noteworthy, however, that the feelings respondents bring up are often negative, burdensome, or difficult. Heidi is not the only one who describes cathartic uses of the game. Dorothy also details how she, at a particularly difficult time during her career, created Sim versions of colleagues who were difficult to work with:

I put them all in a house in the desert and punished them in various ways. Like I would lock the bathroom door and laugh when they got all frustrated and whiny cuz they couldn't get in [to relive themselves]. Juvenile, but very effective in helping me release my anger with them so that the next day, I could handle the project meetings with aplomb. (Dorothy)

In this account the game is used to acknowledge and take care of anger without harming those at whom it is directed. This may seem a juvenile use, as Dorothy herself points out, but it can also be regarded as a form of self-care. After all, a major part of psychotherapeutic work is to assist in uncovering repressed emotions which have, hereto, not been allowed to emerge (Patricia Coughlin Della Selva 1996).

The game is not only used to act out difficult emotions by proxy. Several respondents also mention how they consciously use the game when in a depressed state. Eva, who suffers from bipolar disorder, tells about how she stopped playing because she feared she was living in some kind of dream world via the game that fuelled her illness. Instead of getting better, however, she became more ill to a point where she stopped taking care of

herself. Her brother pleaded with her to take up playing again. Returning to her game, she slowly got back in shape. Gerd, likewise, expresses that she sometimes battles depression, actively using playing as a way to “conquer the deep apathy”:

I play as a way to escape reality for a while. Unlike most of my “creative” hobbies, Sims can usually manage to put 90% of my overactive brain to work, thinking up the story, looking for picture moments, etc. I have to admit that when I’m particularly depressed, it’s not a matter of “having time” but of “making time”—I will neglect other things in order to play Sims sometimes. (Gerd)

Gerd describes how she channels the little energy she has during particularly bad periods of depression into the game in order to avoid rumination. Playing the game offers her a deep focus; a time of respite, which allows her to preserve and build up energy. Gerd has other hobbies, needle-work and cat-breeding, and while she points out that all these hobbies are centred around creation, she finds that playing *TS3* is the one which requires less effort and energy when she has none. At the same time the game still allows her to do something, which helps take her mind off her own problems for a while. Gerd is not the only one who reports using gaming as a way to avoid rumination. Dorothy, who at the time of the interview had recently lost her mother, also details how the game helps her focus for some time on something else, allowing her a respite from bereavement.

Players like Gerd, Dorothy, and Eva describe playing the games as therapeutic—even necessary. Notably, they are all very aware of how they use the activity. They do not describe mindless escape but, rather, a very deliberate one which offers respite from, but not total avoidance of, difficult situations. Another respondent, Marion, who also mentions her struggle with depression, is more sceptical, wondering if playing the games may be a cause rather than treatment:

So, all that said, I am still ambivalent about whether or not the Sims just diverts our creative energy into a harmless pastime that feeds the global economy and ultimately disempowers us. It could be that in reenacting our human creativity we regain a sense that there is something worth fighting for outside the world of the Sims. But here I get caught up in my own psychological struggles—is the Sims a distraction from my life or a valuable part of it? (Marion)

Marion is far from the only respondent to state that they sometimes feel conflicted about spending time on the game, although just as many express that they work hard and feel entitled to relax in any way they choose. For those others who express ambivalence, the feeling is typically connected to a conflict between “just” playing and doing something “useful” in the form of housework, study time, or tangible crafts. This reflects that women’s leisure time is still a contested area both in terms of actual time available to spend and with regards to what kind of activities the feminine subject is expected to engage in (Glenn Stalker 2011; Jillian Winn and Carrie Heeter 2009). Solitary playing, in such a perspective, appears to be neither useful nor sociable and hence not appropriate for the “gentle sex.”

Managing and Taking Control

Throughout most of the interviews, control emerges as a strong theme. As *TS2* and *TS3* are life management games this is no surprise. The respondents in several cases link aspects of control over the game to their own lives. Heidi, for instance, mentions that she

uses the game "to get the order and organization that my own life don't have." A similar statement is made by Katherine, commenting on some of the other respondents' descriptions of their gameplay:

I think it's very cool how Eva and others have such "chaotic" games, but I don't think I could deal with that much chaos. Playing the game the way I do is my way of actually having some control over one aspect of my life, even if it's just a game. There's so much that is out of control that it is nice to be able to sit down and have some order. (Katherine)

Playing the games, then, is described as an arena within everyday life's contingency where one may create order out of chaos and be able to influence how things play out. In terms of the perceived need for being in control, Heidi does not make it clear how her own life may warrant this, but Katherine mentions "the challenge of balancing things like my job, housework, and family time." As already discussed in the previous sections, many of the other respondents face similar as well as additional challenges.

Control is also brought up in relation death. The games allow players to decide whether they will let their Sims die or not, and several players choose to let their Sims live on infinitely. Here, Betty reflects about this:

It may be that I am so uncomfortable with dying sims due to the fact that I do not take death and loss in "real life" very well at all. I had no control that my father was taken from us at such an early age, or my nephew who passed away due to crib death at 3 months old ... or even the dog I so loved who died this year. At least with this silly game ... I do not have to let go (Betty)

Betty describes her experience with bereavement in the family as a major and devastating loss of control. The game, however, allows her to do what she cannot do in her own life. At the beginning of the interview she talks at length about one of her favourite Sims, Brandi Broke, a premade character in *TS2*. Brandi is by default a widow in the game as she has lost her husband, Skip, in a swimming pool accident, but Betty wills it differently:

I developed a very special attachment to Brandi Broke, but it bothered me that Skip had died in that horrible swimming pool accident, lol. So, I deleted the offending pool, went into CAS, and made a Skip Broke who could pass for Dustin and Beau's natural father. (Betty)

Betty in her gameplay undoes death, taking back some of the control she has lost over her existence. Although she presents this act as somewhat silly or laughable, her intervention in Brandi's life is nevertheless the first thing she brings up in her interview. Later, she revisits the topic again, linking it to her own experience. This emphasises the significance she herself assigns to the act.

How may the games provide a sense of control in the often chaotic and unmanageable everyday life? *TS2* and *TS3* are bounded systems. Their highly limited and reductive simulation of life is manageable to a degree where it is possible to control nearly all aspects of the family played in a game session for the player who wants to do this. Thus, a player can micro-manage the day-to-day lives of the household, even extending her control over the game with the use of cheats or game modifications. Likewise, players may define the looks, and to a more limited degree the functions, of Sims and their environments. Apart from being highly controllable, the games are also governed by rules. While the individual player alone may not be able to figure out which kind of output (the

combination of) various game mechanics cause, the fan community spends much time in the shared effort of documenting the inner workings of the games. Part of being an experienced player, then, is an intimate knowledge of the games' intricacies. On this basis, the games can be seen to offer an opportunity for governing and figuring out (a simulation of) existence in a less complex and contingent environment than the lived life. Analysing the social function of gaming, Thomas Malaby (2007) suggests that game playing, due to its intense mix of clear rules and randomness-inducing mechanisms, may aid players in negotiating the uncertainties of existence.

Experimentation

Several of the respondents make it clear that they use *TS2* and *TS3* for different types of experimentation in the sense of both testing ideas and toying with various possibilities. As the games allow players to decorate, moderate, and build houses, experimenting with interior decoration and house styles is one obvious potential. Gerd, for instance, links this activity to her own home, explaining that she does not feel the need to redo her own home as she gets her desire for visual and stylistic change met through aesthetic experimentation in the game.

World building is another type of experimentation which several of the players engage in. The worlds may refer to existing regions but many players also set up more fantastic worlds. Celia, for instance, is working on a science fiction neighbourhood, trying to invent just the right style for it:

The thing with Mayjory, my Sci-fi hood, is that I want a look that doesn't look like human architecture, or at least not standard human architecture. I want to build the houses in an alien equivalent of our "four straight walls, slanted roof" style which is sort of the basic for houses here. [...] So basically it's a vision I guess, I don't want it to look like just modern human houses but I also don't want it to look all spacey and fancy, just like plain, everyday houses but based on a different standard. (Celia)

While Celia's experimentation is centred on aesthetics, her project takes on a more abstract, even philosophical quality as well, as she engages in the question of how alternative societies might live.

Experimentation may go even further to a deliberate critique of the existing social order, as described by Marion:

You're confronted with the choice to engage in critique the minute you start the game—will you make the "traditional heterosexual nuclear family" or something different? [...] When the Sims 2 offered a range of ethnicities in names and the ability create more nuanced faces you had to decide whether to make interracial or ethnic families, etc. I know a lot of people were frustrated that the game randomly mixed names of different ethnicities with Sims who didn't match. I had to confront my own desire to have consistency in themes with what the game throws together. I thought it was good for us all. (Marion)

Although she is far from the only respondent questioning dominant values in society, Marion is the one who most explicitly engages in critical play (Mary Flanagan 2009). Even though Marion, as already discussed, expresses ambivalence with regards to the benefits of gaming, she acknowledges the games' potential for encouraging critical engagement with

the existing social order. Due to their flexibility as well as the randomness of certain game-created assemblages, *TS2* and *TS3* give players plenty of opportunity to de- and reconstruct the details of everyday living, should they so wish. Importantly, with their inherent focus on family life, consumption, and career advancement, the games may just as well be used to reinforce established roles and power structures. Critical and reflexive experimentation, then, is not something which occurs automatically.

Getting What One Does Not Have

Somewhat related to experimentation, but yet distinct, is the notion that the games enable the respondents to have or do things that they either cannot have or do not want in their own life. This theme is not always expressively voiced but still appears as a sentiment in many of the interviews. The example of Gerd, who does not feel the need to change the furniture in her home, has already been discussed. While the attitude behind Gerd's account seems to be practical, Marion, describing her somewhat similar use of the game, stresses the political values underlying her practice:

I know a lot of people have moved to not using cc [custom content] anymore. But I'm one of those sad people who uses the Sims as a substitute for my own impulses to consume. I can't have and I don't want to have any of the stuff my Sims have. But I was raised as a middle class American suburban girl, and I get pleasure from consuming. For political and ethical reasons, I don't want to own a bunch of stuff, so the Sims is the perfect substitute. (Marion)

Declaring her unwillingness to engage in more tangible acts of consumption, Marion instead consumes in the game. She also indulges in building "cute" country cottages and other types of nostalgic houses, even as she questions notions of "authenticity" and the romanticisation of the past. Dealing with her inability to resist things she, according to herself, in theory ought to, Marion has turned her country-themed neighbourhood into a work of enlightenment:

The Sims gives me free reign to indulge. So, I decided to make my own country hood, but with a twist. I based it on rural [country of origin] circa 1925–1945. But instead of a false nostalgic country life, *ShiningTown* is built to remind us of the radical progressive past of [country of origin]—lots and buildings are all named after people and events that created unions, democracy and a strong [country of origin] public/civic life. (Marion)

Indulging through the game in desires she otherwise finds unacceptable to engage in, Marion finds a way to negotiate these pleasures into projects she considers more informed. Marion is also the only respondent who directly describes her gameplay in terms of substitution. Similar sentiments are expressed more implicitly by others, for instance with respect to loss and death as already discussed in some of the other sections.

Eva is someone else who mentions playing with that which she herself does not have or want:

I'm not sure if I play with my own secret desires or my personal dreams, I never talked about my game with my shrink (I'm bipolar, I'm in treatment for the latest 3 years) but I can imagine that my shrink will think that my game is a place filled with material to analysis. LOL But I'm not sure. I mean, all my sims have true love but I'm a loner by

definition and I like to be like this. I was married for 10 years, ended divorced, live alone with my cat and I enjoy this way. I don't think in find true love to myself, only to my sims. I never wanted kids also, when I married we both decided to not have them but several of my sims have big families. (Eva)

Remarking upon the inconsistencies between her own life and her Sims', it is clear that through the game Eva entertains sides of life that she does not herself experience. At the same time she stresses that this way of playing should not be seen as a substitute for perceived lacks in her own life. As discussed earlier, she did at a time stop playing out of a fear that the game served as destructive wish fulfilment, but now she believes it does not. Yet, the tentative doubt in the excerpt intones some degree of ambivalence.

Providing a setting that is at once private, safe, and highly flexible, the games seem to offer many of the respondents a free space where it is possible to engage in aspects of existence that are not available in the lived life due to circumstances, societal order, or one's own values.

Making Something One's Own

The majority of the respondents emphasise the two games' malleability as a major attraction. Offering highly flexible gameplay, tools for construction as well as high modability, the *TS* series and its sequels can be used in many different ways:

The absolute genius of Will Wright was that he realized how important it would be for each player to make the game his/her own. That he enabled, indeed, encouraged early creators and modders allowed each of us to choose exactly how we want to play. Of course, we still have limitations and long wish lists, but this ability to negotiate with the game is what has kept us playing it with real dedication for more than a decade. It is, for me, a prime source of pleasure. And that, too, inspires me to continue to find new ways to develop my gameplay. (Dorothy)

Expressing how important it is for her and other players to be able to make the game their own, Dorothy contextualises gameplay partly in terms of appropriation. Although this seizure of the game by players is often not explicitly linked to everyday life, the theme implicitly emerges in many accounts dealing with the respondents' lived lives. Some examples have already been discussed, for instance, in relation to relaxation, control, and experimentation. The respondent who makes the most explicit link between making the game her own and her everyday life is Joan:

My way of living is probably rather close than my way of playing: I take my time, and I like making most the stuff around me "my own." (Joan)

Joan understands herself as someone who likes to put her own mark on her surroundings. At my probing into this desire she explains further the urge to make things her own both in terms of influence and as a means to fulfil desires. She appropriates the game in several ways. She creates custom content which she shares freely online, but she has also modified one of the worlds that shipped with *TS3* to be "more coherent, more european." Making the game her own, for Joan, both means to modify its look and atmosphere as well as sometimes playing against the grain:

The game has an in-built model ("work and get promoted," "buy more," "make kids"), but I'd be tempted to say: every society has! *lol* I'm 38 years old and I don't have kids, and I'm often asked why. I've never heard anyone asking to a woman why she HAD kids. *rolleyes* So, there's this pressure as well in the game. Above all about kids, not that much about marriage, I think. But as it's always possible to play (and to live) out of the bounds, it's not a problem. The game allows gay marriages, adoption, single Sims, large difference of age in a couple, and even oddities like love stories with ghosts, mummies, robots, which is already a much larger choice than our society offers! (Joan)

Joan, then, both when playing and living her own life, rejects some of the dominant notions of the good (female) life. Several of the other respondents in similar ways make the games their own by forcing their own values on the gameplay rather than succumbing to the models offered by the game.

Creative Outlet

Most of the respondents not only play with the Sims but also engage creatively with the many features provided by the game. The players interviewed here create Sims, houses, worlds, custom content, and stories, directly or implicitly conceptualising their use of the games as a creative outlet. For several it even seems the most important function of the game as, for instance, voiced by Joan:

I was first attracted by the "simulation life" of the Sims 1, but with time, it's the "creativity" that made the Sims games so enjoyable for me. I love that you can create anything, from a character to a world. I wouldn't play if I couldn't make my own stuff. (Joan)

While Joan describes herself as someone who would create no matter what, for others the games have been a catalyst for self-expression. Irene, for instance, explains that the game has given her the opportunity to explore unknown creative territory. Getting inspiration from other players in the community, Irene's gameplay has, over the years, transformed from micro-management into story-gaming. Not only does she now develop stories through her gameplay, she even shares them on her blog with pictures taken in the game:

What would I do if I couldn't Sim? This is much harder for me to answer. I would miss it unbelievably much. The game has become my creative outlet, which is something I haven't had before and to be honest, something I never really felt the need for before. (Irene)

Playing the game and interacting with other players, Irene has found a voice and a means for self-expression. Although she did not feel the need for this previously, story-telling via the game has now become very precious to her.

The opportunity to create is also described as highly valued by others to the degree where it is something that is made time for in busy time schedules:

I had in mind this fantasy lot I wanted to build, and I said to myself as soon as the semester is over I am going to take as many hours and days as it takes to build this lot. I was so psyched to have my time all to myself. It was my plan for Winter break. And I did it. And it turned out so beautiful [. . .]. (Marion)

Marion describes the game as a creative retreat which she takes time out for in the midst of all her other responsibilities. While the players do not necessarily create serious art of life-changing critique, Virginia Woolf's notion of a room of one's own comes to mind (Virginia Woolf 2001, 6). In Woolf's time it was a question of literally having the right to one's own work space (Wendy Gan 2009) closely coupled with the general lack of equal rights for women. In current Western society the question of personal space is often linked to that of time and the fact that women typically work more hours than men, counting waged labour, care, and house work (Margaret Beck and Jeanne Arnold 2009; Jonathan Gershuny and Oriel Sullivan 2003; Marybeth Mattingly and Liana Sayer 2006).

Creating a Space of One's Own

One way to understand the emic categories discussed above is to see them as articulations of a space of one's own, an etic category identifiable throughout most interviews. The notion of a space of one's own here holds several meanings.

Firstly, it refers to a sphere of relative freedom or lack of disturbance carved out by the individual in the midst of everyday life's demands. This is particularly visible in relation to "relaxation and stress relief" and "creative outlet." That taking time out for playing the games is a deliberate and active choice is voiced again and again in the accounts discussed above. Joke Hermes (1995), in her study of the uses of women's magazines, concludes that this medium is chosen more for its functionality than for its content. According to Hermes, one of the most important features of women's magazines is their put-downableness (1995, 29–65). Playing *TS2* and *TS3*, on the other hand, for the respondents here is something that requires time and commitment. Quite consciously and through engagement with the games, they demarcate a stretch of time as being their own, rather than dedicated to job, partner, family, friends, or other ways of "being useful." Importantly, this space is not an isolated place. Others are invited into this retreat, mainly via online participation in the community dedicated to the games.

Secondly, a space of one's own can also be understood as making room in one's life to care for oneself as discussed in relation to the notion of "playing according to mood." This is a mental and therapeutic space where the individual spends time and energy on more or less conscious care for the self. Here the players use the game as a means to handle various emotional states, particularly difficult ones such as anger, depression, or mourning. This is done by consciously channelling these conditions into the playing session either looking for an outlet of emotion or for an intense focus which for some time creates a respite from rumination. Whether this form of care goes beyond the immediate setting as plans for change or revolt against oppressing structures is not clear here. To the degree that reflection may be a first step towards taking action there seems to be a potential for empowerment.

Thirdly, creating a space of one's own is also related to various ways of handling lack of control and taking control, as discussed in relation to "managing and control," "experimentation," "getting what one does not have," and "making something one's own." Here the notion refers to various ways of processing one's position in the world both as a helpless human being and as an agent with a measure of power to change things, take a stand, or recover from the blows dealt by life. The space of one's own is a place of acknowledgement, reflection, and struggle related to being an active subject who may negotiate the structures of the surrounding world.

A final meaning of a space of one's own is to consciously engage in a creative project as when the respondents use the games as a "creative outlet" and for "making something one's own." This notion is somewhat linked to that of taking control, in that creative work can be regarded as shaping the world according to one's vision. The creative act should not automatically be regarded as empowering or subversive, but it may be a step towards developing a voice of one's own (Fiona Carson and Claire Pajackowska 2000).

Conclusion

As the above analysis implies, one way to understand some players' use of *TS2* and *TS3* is to regard the activity as the creation of a space of one's own in the widest sense of the phrase. All kinds of gaming, to the degree that they are deliberate acts to carve out a time and space for one self, can be envisioned as spaces of one's own. However, many of the expressions of the phenomenon discussed here do not seem to fit more dominant understandings of the gaming experience as being instrumentally oriented towards conquest. Gaming here is not articulated as primarily fun or aimed at victory, although it is certainly seen as absorbing and oriented towards self-defined goals. In the discussed accounts playing becomes a way not only to escape other obligations for a while but also in various ways to work with the self and its place in everyday life. Importantly, the games in themselves do not automatically enforce either acceptance of dominant values or subversion of the same. Rather, it is in the active meaning-making through play that the players, alone in front of the game and together with the other players online, tackle issues of everyday living. Sometimes quite unconsciously and at other times very deliberately.

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NOTES

1. The respondents' written answers to my questions appear here in their original wording, complete with any spelling or grammatical errors. This reflects both the informal, conversation-like mood of the correspondence as well as the fact that several respondents do not have English as their first language.
2. Internet based communication is often searchable and accessible long after it was created, consequently netnographic data may be more easily traced to the source compared to interviews and observations carried out face-to-face (Kozinets, 2010, 136–156). In order to protect the privacy of the respondents, they as well as their custom made Sims and worlds appear under pseudonyms.
3. The emic categories may overlap slightly as they seek to reflect respondents' own understandings and vocabulary.

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